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AUTHOR Belcheir, Marcia J.; Michener, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

This second in a series of qualitative studies examined the classroom experiences and impressions of first-time freshmen at Boise State University (BSU, Idaho). Twenty-five freshmen completed weekly open-ended telephone interviews, kept journals, and participated in an end-of-term group meeting during the fall term of 1996. The results indicated that students mainly chose classes from the catalog that looked interesting and did not worry much about whether the classes would be hard or easy. Most of the students reported that they were doing well in their classes, and most named Introduction to Psychology as their favorite course, though English and Communication were also named by more than one student. English and Communication were also named as courses where students had the most concerns. In general, students reported that they were very pleased with the quality of teaching and felt that professors made themselves available to students. Most students talked to their professors during the semester, though eight did not. It was found that the students who performed most poorly were least likely to have talked to faculty. (MDM)

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It's Academic: A Qualitative Study of Student Classroom Experiences

Research Report 97-06

by:
Barbara Michener
and
Marcia J. Belcheir

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Office of Institutional Assessment
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Marcia J. Belcheir

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Abstract

It's Academic:
A Qualitative Study of Student Classroom Experiences

This is the second in a series of reports detailing the experiences of 25 freshmen new to BSU in the Fall of 1996. This report focuses on the experiences students had in the classroom including how classes were chosen, expectations for classes, self-reports on how they were doing, quality of teaching experienced, plus classes that were favorites and those that caused the most difficulties for new students. Findings were based on weekly phone interviews, student journals, and a group meeting at the end of the semester.

Students mainly chose classes from the catalog that looked interesting and did not worry much about whether the classes would be hard or easy. They registered for what was available and what their advisor told them. Only one student tried to be first in line during her registration time to better ensure she got what she wanted.

All students had at least one class with an enrollment of less than 20. In addition, almost all had at least one large lecture hall course of 200-300 students. While they preferred the smaller classes, most were resigned to the practicality of the large classes and didn't complain much about them.

Most students named Introduction to Psychology as their favorite course, though English and Communication were also named by more than one student. English and Communication were also named as the courses where students had the most concerns. In English, the main difficulty seemed to be understanding what was wanted from them by professors on papers and how they were performing in the class. In Communication, some students had difficulty understanding a professor with a strong foreign accent.

In general, however, students were very pleased with the quality of teaching and felt that their professors made themselves available to them. Students preferred a knowledgeable, personable teacher with a sense of humor. They described teaching as poor when the professors had a "high

and mighty" attitude, when they didn't know where they stood in class, and when they wanted more examples in order to understand the concept.

Most students (15) talked to their professors during the semester, though eight did not. They had a variety of reasons for talking to faculty, but generally it did not include poor performance in class. Indeed, students who performed most poorly were less likely to talk to faculty. These students indicated that because they were not doing well in the class, they felt like they could not approach the professor with their concerns—that the professor already knew they would fail, and that the professor would get mad because they didn't understand.

It's Academic:

A Qualitative Study of Student Classroom Experiences

Classes can create enthusiasm or be an overwhelming experience for first time freshmen students. The large lecture halls and the fast pace of course work are new experiences for many students. And yet, for most students, by the time they complete their first semester, they have become accustomed to the college routine.

The Freshmen Study, initiated fall semester of 1996, was an attempt to get a picture of the life of first time freshman students at Boise State University both inside and outside the classroom. Open-ended interviews were used to achieve a glimpse of the world through the eyes of 25 freshmen chosen to represent a spectrum of the freshman class (see Appendix A for sketches of the students included in the study). Data were acquired through three methods. First, the students were interviewed weekly during the fall semester. Secondly, journals were kept by the students in which they recorded both positive and negative experiences of all aspects of their lives. Finally, a group meeting was held in December during which they met each other and the research team face-to-face for the first time. This in-depth, long term relationship with the students allowed for gathering data not generally available by traditional survey methods. Research found that events, both on campus and in their personal lives, impacted not only their education in progress, but also whether they stayed in school or left.

This report focuses on what students said about their first-semester classroom experiences. A report that discusses their first interactions with the University is also available (see research report 97-04). An additional report on who returned or left the University and who was academically successful will be published in the fall of 1997. The Freshmen Study will continue tracking these students for several more years until they complete their degree, transfer to another college, or quit school.

Findings on Classroom Experiences

How classes were chosen:

Most students chose classes that looked interesting to them from the lists in the catalog. Half of the students chose their classes from the core lists and by what sounded interesting. Seven chose classes in their major, and five chose what their advisor recommended. Four had the insight to stagger what they considered to be the hard classes over several semesters. One student took classes to learn about a major, one chose refresher courses, and two were on provisional status so they had to take required classes.

Only seven students said they chose easy classes over hard ones the first semester, while fifteen said they did not choose any easy ones. Four thought their classes were going to be easy, but found they were not. Several students indicated that easiness of the classes was not a factor at all in selecting classes. One student took a refresher English class because she was from another country. Slightly more than half, or 13, said they chose core classes, and 11 said they chose both core classes and classes in their major.

> *"Mom would be mad at me if I took bone head classes so I took harder ones to apply myself."*
>
> (Barry)

Strategies to get classes at registration:

It takes most freshmen one or two semesters in college to organize a strategy to get into classes, and this was reflected in freshmen responses to this question. When asked what strategy they used to get the classes they wanted, ten said they had no strategy, nine said their advisor helped them choose, and four said they just got lucky. Four said they had to get special permission for classes they wanted; two said their registration date was early so their classes were not full yet; and two said they just took whatever was open. Only one student tried to be first in line during her registration time. One used the drop/add process to pick up classes that were full at registration. One student had special help because she was an exchange student, and one left times open on her schedule to get a particular professor she wanted.

Class size and expectations:

Once enrolled, class sizes varied from small to large for students. All students had at least one class of 20 or under enrollment, usually English. Nineteen had classes of less than 30 students. In addition, almost everyone (21 of 24) had large lecture hall courses of 200-300 students, usually core classes. Surprisingly, most seemed to accept the large lecture halls as necessary for the institution. Jake was typical of the group, however, when he indicated that he liked the smaller classes better because he enjoyed more discussion and comparison to real life than the large lecture hall courses could afford.

> *"I like them all. They (classes) are just what I hoped for the first year."*
> (Jake)

Freshmen students' expectations about their classes at the beginning of the fall semester were so mixed it was difficult to find a general pattern. However, only four students thought classes were no different from what they expected, and five students didn't know what to expect regarding their classes. Five indicated that they disliked the large, impersonal lecture halls, but they were resigned to the practicality of them. Three students said they were especially impressed that the professors cared about the students. Three thought the classes were easier than they had expected, and three thought the classes were harder than they expected. Other comments included liking the freedom in college course work, and that they had no busy work. A few thought it was just like high school.

> *"The size was astounding. They were much larger than high school. Not being able to talk to teachers without an appointment is different."*
> (Rod)

Student reports on how they were doing in class:

During their first term, most of the students in the study thought they were doing well in their classes. A solid majority of the students, or 19, said their classes were going "really good" or "good." Later, six thought they were performing on an average level, and one knew she was

doing poor work and transferred to the College of Applied Technology at the end of the semester. One said the course work was too easy (and her fall grades were indeed almost all A's).

However, the study found that some students seemed unable to make early accurate appraisals of how they were doing academically. Several students with low GPAs gave few signs during the interviews that they were having difficulties, despite direct questions about their academic progress. It became evident at the end of the first semester that they either did not know how they were doing or that they would not share their difficulties with the researcher. Another student told the researcher that he knew he wasn't doing well but remained the eternal optimist and thought that things would get better later. Things did not get better, and he received a 0.0 GPA for fall semester. (He did not return for spring semester.)

Another possible reason for the inaccurate appraisals was that students lacked enough feedback from faculty on their performance. English classes with their lack of one true answer seemed to pose particular problems. Several students commented that they did not get good feedback about their work from their English professors. Some did not have any conferences or meetings with their professor during the fall semester to discuss their writing. One student shared that her professor rambled off the topic, and students left class not knowing what was needed on their papers. Several others said they disagreed with their English professor, and thought that they got graded down because of it.

> *"The only class that worries me is English. If he doesn't like my topic, I could get a bad grade. It's not fair. It's just one person's opinion. He is a tough critic."*
>
> (Stephanie)

Many of the freshman students felt they needed more feedback from

> *"I love my English class. She is extremely friendly, really helps a lot. I had a conference after my first paper to tell me what I need to work on."*
>
> (Angie)

their professors earlier in the fall semester. They wanted feedback that would let them know what to work on and where they stood in the class. More tests per semester were desired to help them realize the quality of work they were producing. Several students felt insecure not knowing how they were doing during the semester and wished for more feedback. Some seemed to be disappointed when they received their fall semester grades.

Classes liked the most and those that gave cause for concern:

When asked which classes students liked the most, Psychology got the most votes, with Communication and English also named. Fourteen other classes also were named at least once. The First YES course (GE 197), designed to acclimate students to the University, was named as a favorite by the two students in the study who were enrolled in it. These students liked the information they got from the GE197 course. They said it helped them become familiar with the campus, especially the library, the health center, and the administration offices. They also found many benefits in reading and study skills taught in these courses. They indicated that the GE197 classes were approximately twenty students which made it easy for them to ask questions and have discussion.

> *Jim said he liked his History of Western Civilization course because his professor "makes you re-think everything that you've always thought."*

When asked what class most concerned them, freshmen listed English most often (six times). This may have been at least in part because more students were enrolled in this course than any other. It was probably also due to the subject matter. The complaints about English classes centered around the students not getting enough feedback from the professor to determine their position in class or how to change their writing. They said there were no tests to let them know how they are doing. One student said the professor was not helpful, and that students felt like they were guessing at what was wanted. One student felt the professor was too critical of students' ideas for paper topics.

> *"I don't know how she wants it. I thought I had it right, but still got a D grade on my (English) paper."*
>
> (Carl)

In second place for the course causing the most student concern was Communication which was mentioned five times. In some Communication classes a professor with a strong foreign dialect made it hard for the students to understand instructions, lectures, and how they were doing in class. Several students were very frustrated by their Communication professor and protested to the department chair. The students reported that a second professor attended classes for a while, but that nothing improved. When the second professor wrote the test, students complained it covered different information than the lecture, and frustrated them even more. Two students indicated they would retake the class because they felt they hadn't learned anything.

Quality of teaching:

For the most part students were pleased with the quality of teaching their first semester, though it took them several weeks to make judgements about whether the professors were what they expected or not. The majority of the students, or 21, thought the level of teaching for all of their professors their first semester of college was good, very good, or excellent, and eight said it was excellent. Of the remaining three, one said it was average, one said it was poor, and one said it was very poor.

> *"My Communication teacher is great. She makes them (students) all get involved. I enjoy meeting new people in group work."*
>
> (Seth)

A knowledgeable, personable, friendly professor was rated as the best teacher, while an unfriendly, uncaring, disorganized professor was rated as not good. Six students described teaching as good when the professors showed they cared about the students. Six said it was good when the professors were easy to understand, and five said when they were enthusiastic about their subject. Five thought it was when they were perceived as friendly. Four students liked it when they were allowed interaction in class, and four said the professors were good because they knew the subject matter. Three said professors made the class enjoyable when they used humor.

Barry liked his English teacher's style of teaching. He said, "I find it easy to write. She is unconventional and makes class more fun. For mid-term she drew a picture, then we had to write about it. It made it more fun".

The students described teaching as poor when the professors had a "high and mighty" attitude (2), when the students didn't know where they stood (2), and when they wanted more use of examples in class (2). Two commented on the poor communication in Communication class. Two said the teacher was impersonal and cold, and therefore unapproachable. Other comments were that a teacher was not interested in teaching, that a teacher was putting the students down in class, and that the lectures were monotone. One student said that her teacher wandered off the subject, and one said that the teacher gave review materials only to study groups and not the whole class.

Most students were able to identify favorite professors. Some were favorites because they made the class interesting and exhibited a lot of enthusiasm for their subject and for teaching. Others were favorites because they showed special interest in the individual students. The students especially liked the professors who were friendly and took time to talk to them, either after class or around campus. Five students especially liked the professors who appeared to be knowledgeable about their subjects. The students liked the ones who were full of energy, creative in their classes, and those who acted and dressed professionally. They did not care for, and recognized, the professors who they felt used intimidation against the students.

"It's funny, great. He teaches in a way that makes you want to learn. Uses stories and that makes it more real to you."

(Laurel)

Karen liked her professor because "he is always joking around and keeps us awake."

Student-Faculty contact:

Research has shown that when students talked to their professors, their chances of success increased (see Research Report 97-05). Fifteen students talked to their professors during the semester, while eight students did not. One reason they gave for meeting their professors was because they wanted him or her to recognize them in class. Some talked to their professors because they liked knowing whether their work was right or wrong, and they talked about concepts from class. Twelve of the 15 who talked to their professors thought it was productive. Two felt unsure about what the teacher wanted from them in their papers in English even after talking with them, and one talked to his professor about his grades.

Of the eight who didn't talk to their professors, five said they would have liked to talk to their teachers even though they had not. Most of this group (6) said they didn't talk to them because everything was going alright and their grades were satisfactory. One had no time to see them because she had to go directly to work after class, and one said it was a lecture class and there were too many students talking to the professor already. Several students felt their poor grades made their professor inaccessible.

> *"The D grade made her inaccessible. I don't feel like approaching her. Ya know, the comment on the paper said, this is better, but the grade was lower than before. I was afraid, ya know, she might get mad if I tried to talk to her."*
>
> Carl

Nearly all of the students thought their professors made themselves available to them. It was perceived that professors made themselves accessible by giving out appointment times and phone numbers. Nineteen students said their professors gave this information to everyone in class. Seventeen said they made themselves accessible by having friendly attitudes and by being willing to talk to them after class.

The students felt the professors who made themselves inaccessible did so by not acting friendly,

by leaving directly after class, and by not having office hours on the Mountain Home campus. Two students felt that a professor was unapproachable because they received a low grade. The students had the perception that it would not make any difference if they talked to the professor because the professor viewed the student as unable to do the work. Their grades showed that these students were most in need of speaking with the professor to understand what was being required.

Conclusions:

The majority of freshmen students can, and did, survive their first semester of college. They made course selections from the required lists and their major (if declared) and didn't necessarily choose easy classes instead of hard ones. In fact, most students felt their classes were demanding and required concentrated study habits.

The students were somewhat surprised to find the large lecture hall classes, but survived them as part of the reality of college life. They did prefer, however, the smaller class sizes where they could participate in discussion, and where it was perceived they had more access to the professor. They were resigned to enroll in classes that were available when they registered and were not too concerned about getting into specific classes.

The majority of the students in this study did not have a good idea of how they were doing in the classes until semester grades were posted. Most of them wished for more feedback earlier in the fall semester about their work. Some thought they were doing satisfactory work, but in fact were not.

They all agreed that they liked friendly, caring professors who showed an enthusiasm for teaching and their topic. But some students felt restrained in talking to their professors, especially when they were perceived as unfriendly, uncaring, impersonal, and unapproachable. It was surprising to find that those students most in need of talking to their professors were least likely to do so. Poor

performance made them withdraw, defensive and frustrated, rather than take steps to discuss what they could do to improve in the class.

By the end of the first semester of college, these students either learned to survive at the institution and return for another term or became overwhelmed, typically not even completing the semester. Perhaps the comments from the students themselves offering intimate glimpses into their fears, frustrations and accomplishments can help the University to tailor the first semester to be a productive one for all students. The next report in this series will focus on the characteristics of students who returned in the spring and next fall compared to those who did not.